This is an autobiography of Katharine Gilbert Aeschliman given to Kristine Lenore Huber Mallett in 1995.

My life's adventure began in Peking, China, on March 7, 1907. I was the third child born into the Alvin and Mattie Gilbert family. I was named after Aunt Katy, my mother's sister who had died of T. B. at the age of twenty-seven.

Papa always called me Kath-A-Reen. I was not given a middle name. When I was growing up the kids at school called me "Pet." Later that changed to "Pat" and then to "Patricia." Katharine P. Gilbert was the name I used on my marriage license.

My oldest brother, Edmond James was born on January 23, 1904, in Warren Pennsylvania. Alvin Walter Jr. followed on March 27, 1906. Jeannette Emily joined our family two years after me on February 20, 1909. Mama definitely had her hands full with four children in five years. Alvin had been born with a cleft palette and almost didn't make it because he could not nurse. Mama kept him alive by squeezing her milk into a teaspoon and feeding it to him.

Mama, Mattie Sophia Thayer, was born in Iola, Kansas on May 5, 1869. There were nine children in Mama's family. Mama used to tell me about the time that she was mopping the kitchen floor. They had a pet raccoon. Whenever she would get the mop out, the raccoon would come racing over and sit on the mop while she swished it back and forth. They really had a good laugh each time she mopped the floor.

After Mama had grown up she went on to college training to become a nurse. She was kind, loving, compassionate, and had a good sense of humor and was a dedicated Christian.

Papa, Alvin Walter Gilbert, was born in Coon Rapids, Iowa, on November 14, 1873. He spoke Chinese as a second language. He died from pneumonia on September 19, 1948, when he was 75 years old.

When he was sixteen, they had a horse and buggy and he drove it up to the house from the barn. They had a circular driveway and he drove the team around the circle. His father came out and was upset and said, "A miss is as good as a mile." His papa took out the horse whip and gave him a thrashing he never forgot!

My parents, Mattie and Alvin, were neighbors and lived on adjoining farms.

Before I was born, Papa was sent to Peking, China, by the YMCA.

At home when we were small and growing up, Papa used to come up and put us to bed and tuck us in. Then he would hear us say our prayers and he would pray for us. We had family prayers every morning and Mama and Papa would take turns. Papa always read from the Old Testament or from Revelation. Mama would read from the New Testament. We would read the Bible and pray and then we would get ready for school. I don't ever

remember Papa raising his voice at us, especially when we were in China we would not ever quarrel or raise our voices because the servants would hear and then they would talk to the other servants in the city.

My first experience of snow was in Chefoo, China. It didn't snow much in the part of China that we lived but on this particular day we had snow. Jeannette was a baby at the time. I remember Edmond rigged up a sled made out of a crate box. We went outside and Papa pulled us around. I looked up in the sky and saw this white stuff coming down. I didn't know if I should cry or not, but I didn't think it would do any good anyway.

A rickshaw is a two-wheeled buggy that accommodates one adult or two children. It was like a chair on wheels and a coolie servant would pull it. We only took that when we were going to a party and were dressed up. Otherwise, we walked to everything else. We used to have a rickshaw man that was always outside of our gate when we needed him. The folks hired a coolie to be a gate keeper.

Papa resigned from the YMCA in Chefoo, China, after two years in 1904 because they wanted him to dispense beer and cigarettes to the service men and he didn't believe that was the right thing to do.

He accepted a position in the American Consulate Service in Nanking where he worked for eight years from 1910 to 1918. In China, when he was at the consulate, he was businesslike and he had a lot of important contacts, officials and engagements that he had to keep; especially during the Revolutionary years because he was in charge of the consulate, and anything that had anything to do with Americans living in China would have to come to the consulate and talk with him because he was the only one there was. The missionaries really held him in high regard because he was their only mainstay between them and the Chinese and he kept them safe.

Mama had a lot of time to spend with us because she had servants doing the work and our Amah that took care of us. Mama read a lot of books to us.

The American ladies each had a day in their home when they served tea and our day was usually Saturday and all the American ladies around would come over for tea.

In 1911, my Papa became Vice-Consul at Nanking and was acting consul-in-charge when the Chinese Republic received official recognition from the U.S. in 1913.

We lived in Nanking when I was three years old. The revolution was going on and every once in a while there was shooting going on. Papa was the consul in charge most of the time because they would send out somebody from the States that got the job and they were scared of the shooting so they would go back to the States. So, Papa was there in charge. He was a Christian so that kind of made him different from the others because the ones he worked with were business people. All the missionaries lived in one place and had their schools in one place. We never left the city in the summer for vacation because we didn't have as much money as the missionaries did. We weren't rich people

like the missionaries were. The missionaries all got to go to the mountains in the summer.

In Nanking, we had a "dog cart." It was an English contraption that was two wheeled with hard rubber tires on it. It had big wheels and the seat was up high. It was open and had an umbrella over the top of it with two seats back to back. We used to ride it when we went to school that was quite a ways from our home. We had a little white pony called "Prince" and we drove him ourselves. But there had to be a servant at the school to take him and tie him up for us. Our poor old pony was deathly afraid of the cargo conveniences which was a truck bed on two wheels with a long bed and narrow sides. They would stack them with bales of cotton and crews of men would pull and push it with long ropes and they would say, "Hiya Howa, Hiya, Howa" and Prince was just sure that those things were gong to come and get him! The minute he saw those things coming he would take off like a shot out of a gun. He'd get the bit in his teeth and just race down the road. It just scared the daylights out of me! I'd see the "gotcha" coming and I would jump off the back side.

We had a dog named "Buster" that was kind of like a cocker spaniel and he was a sweet little dog. He would see the Chinese dogs and just take off after them. The Chinese dogs were skin and bones and starved to death, but he just loved to chase them. Buster got mangled one time after he messed with another dog. The doctor gave us some ointment to put on him and he told Edmond to keep it covered because it was poison and the dog must not lick it. But, somehow he licked it and that was the end of Buster.

One summer when I was about nine during summer break from school, we had a little stove burner that some missionaries left with us. There were frogs by the billions out in the back of the house. I don't think Mama knew this was going on because I don't think she would have approved. We put a little wad of cotton on a string and hang it down in front of the bull frog and he would swallow it. So we would pull the string up quick and grab him. Then we would knock him on the head to kill him and cut off their hind legs and fry the frog legs on the stove.

One day there was a commotion out on the cobblestone street in front of our house. There was a man and a woman and a girl about twelve years old and a crowd following. The girl was just digging her feet into the cobble stone and screaming her lungs out. There was a man about 21 years old following along and looking kind of sheepish. Wang do Sou, our Amah, went out to see what all the commotion was about and when she came back in Mama asked her what she had found out. She was trying hard not to cry but the tears ran down anyway. She said "That's just the way they did me." The little girl had been betrothed to the young man two years earlier. They had taken her there twice but she cried so hard and made such a fuss that they took her back home. Her father said that they did not have enough to feed her and the other family had already paid the price for her and she had to go to them. Wang do Sou just kept saying, "That's just the way they did me," with big tears rolling down her face.

One time there was a Chinese woman out on the street huddled up in the rain trying to keep warm. I asked Mama if we could go back and give her something warm to put on. Mama said she wouldn't get to keep it because her husband would take it and sell it for Opium. I felt sorry for all the little children walking around barefoot and naked in the snow and slush. But I had grown up seeing all the poverty and beggars so it didn't bother me too much. But as I approached adolescence these things began to bother me.

Whenever anyone asked me what I was going to be when I grew up, I always said that I was going to become a nurse and then be a missionary in China.

Papa left the consulate and I am not sure what the circumstances were. He got a job at the University in Wuchang, China for two years.

Mama talked German and she taught it. She was an American teaching German to Chinese people. She taught at Nanking University.

My father got a job in a government teaching college. He also served as a construction superintendent for the Nanking-American school that was built there. They built a nice little school up on the hill in the summer time when all the missionaries were on furlough. We were still in Nanking because the government never allowed for a paid vacation. Papa's work went on all year around. There had to be somebody in charge all the time, so he was elected to be the overseer of all the work because the construction had to be overseen by someone responsible. Papa would walk around the building and check on the glass they were putting in the windows if it had any bubbles in it he would take his cane and break it.

We always lived close to where Papa worked. When he worked at the Consulate we lived near the school and our neighbors were all the other people from the university. The houses were made of red brick and it was two-story, with servant quarters in the back of the house. It did not have much of a kitchen but then we didn't have to do the cooking because we had a Chinese cook.

One day some of the students came to him and said, "Mr. Gilbert, you'd better take your family and get back to the States just as quick as you an." The students were getting pretty fierce about foreigners. They all liked him and respected him and didn't want him or his family to get hurt.

Papa had a nice little Chinese fan that was round and made of sand wood that he would fan himself with. It was hotter than blazes. Some of the students came to him before he left and said, "Mr. Gilbert, we've bought you a fan that is more suitable to your position." It was a big white fan and they had written all kinds of honorable things on it.

After two years of teaching in China we returned to the US. When Mama told me that we were moving back to America, I was so excited. Then I got to thinking and asked, "Mama, which of the servants are we going to take with us?" She said, "Katie, we won't have servants in America." I was aghast and said, "Well, who is going to do all the

work?" That is when I was informed that we would all be doing the work. Well, I thought that would be a challenge and it would be fun to do all the things I was never allowed to do in China; work in the kitchen, gather eggs, feed the chickens, etc. It was an adjustment but I settled in to the new life fairly well.

I learned to speak Chinese at the same time I learned English. I don't remember that much of the language but sometimes it comes back to me when I am startled. In 1976, Jeanette and I went to Japan for two months and joined three teachers to go to Taiwan. We were in a taxi and the driver wasn't American and we had the address written on a card and he didn't know where it was. We drove back and forth and round and round for what seemed like two hours. The road was so narrow and the traffic was so fierce and he pulled up to a compound and said, "This is it," and the Chinese words popped in to my head to say, "What if this isn't the place and the driver leaves us here?" I was surprised to be thinking in Chinese. I told the lady at the teen center what I had thought and she told me that is how you say it in Chinese.

Did anyone live with you?

The servants and our Amah, (nanny,) lived in back of the house separate from us. We weren't allowed to go back there or to associate with the servants.

We had seen the way the cook made bread. He would take a mouthful of water and spit it all out into the bread dough when he made the bread. It was his way of sprinkling the dough with water; but Mama didn't know it. One day I was sitting out on the back steps and she saw me blow water in to the mud in my hand and she said, "What are you doing?" I told her I was making bread; that's the way to make bread. She told me that's not the way that we make bread and I informed her that that was the way the cook does it. When Mama wasn't around, they sprinkled the clothes the same way. We kids weren't supposed to be around the servants and I had no business in the kitchen.

Our Amah was paid $8.00 per month, plus room and board. She had bound feet and had to walk on her heels. She just hobbled and her toes hurt all the time. One time she was combing my hair and I was restless and I was wiggling and squirming and I accidentally stepped on her foot. She dropped the comb and grabbed her foot and tried not to show the pain. I felt terrible but couldn't tell her because she wasn't the affectionate kind; she knew her place and it wouldn't have been proper to throw my arms around her.

Once when Jeanette was a toddler, she and Amah were in the other room and I heard Amah singing. I had never heard her sing before. So I went in and said, "Amah, what did you sing?" She said, "Nothing, nothing," and tried to shoo me off. She didn't want to tell me; she was embarrassed. So, I coaxed her into singing it again. She was singing in English, "Peekaboo, I see you. Whatcha make a baby do?"

She was married but her husband didn't live there because he was an alcoholic and a drug addict. He used to come and see her and demand money from her. She saved her money and didn't spend it. She had $40 saved up one time and he came and hung around

outside and waited until everyone was gone and then he would come up to the gate and holler and yell and cuss and carry on; it was terrible. Poor Amah; she was so embarrassed.

What was your favorite subject in school? Reading; I started reading at the age of four. I was always in trouble in grade school. There were only three of us in the third grade and I was the only girl. There was one teacher who taught all the grades. She was the mother of one of the students. Jimmy sat in front of me and we were making alphabet codes and would pass it back and forth. The teacher never caught us at it.

Moving from China to the states. 1920

Because we left in a hurry, Papa didn't have any money and we had to come third class which was in the bottom of the boat. We were the only ones down there so we had the whole place to ourselves. We had our meals down there; Japanese peasant food. We had second deck privileges; I would stand at the deck and look at the water and then have to go lie down; I was sick most of the month long trip. We had deck games. There was an Englishman that didn't like to see a young girl lying in the deck chair all day long so he would try to get me to play shuffle board. One day, there was a storm and the boat was rocking back and forth. For some reason, I felt good that day. I was walking up the stairs and the ship was going from side to side. As I almost got up to the top, it threw me forward and there was a big fat Spaniard that spoke broken English coming down. My head hit right in the middle of his paunch and he cried, "Oh, my belly, my belly!"

When we got to Pullman, Uncle Lewis picked us up in his brand new Dodge touring car with curtains for windows. Uncle Lewis told us that when it rains he had curtains to pull down. Lewis, his son, who was about 16 at the time, was driving. Uncle Lewis said, "Now son, don't go more than 20 miles an hour, remember?" "I remember, Papa," Lewis said. That was the speed limit in those days.

Grandma Thayer was the only grandparent that I got to meet. After we moved back to the States I got to meet Grandma Thayer because she was living with Uncle Lewis, my mama's brother. She was only there for a few weeks and then she left. She sat in a rocker at Uncle Lewis' home and I was just in awe of her. She was "Grandma" and I had never had a grandma before. It was really exciting to me but she didn't seem to be too impressed with having another bunch of kids around.

We lived in their old weather-beaten homestead house. They had built a new bungalow for themselves. When it rained the roof leaked, but it was big enough for us. We were there for a couple of years. Papa got a job with the Postal Service in Almota and then we moved to Almota. Later on, I moved back with Uncle Lewis so that I could go to high school in Pullman.

We walked to school each day and it was about two miles. When it rained we needed to wear rubber boots but they didn't have any that fit me so I had to wear an old pair of barn boots.

When I graduated from high school, I wanted to go into nursing so I enrolled in a WSU pre-nursing program. After that, I enrolled in nurses training for three years which in those days was in a hospital and we learned skills on the job and we were paid for it.

There was an eye doctor that asked the head nurse my name. He told her that from then on he wanted me to help his with cataract surgery because my hands didn't tremble. I really felt like the top dog at that time. I was glad that somebody appreciated me.

Jr. High and High school years;

When I was in high school in Pullman, they gave us an IQ test. As I was taking the test I thought, "How are these kids going to answer these questions? I did know the answers because I had read everything under the sun. When we were all through, my best friend was doing office training in the office and she saw the scores. She came to me that day and said, "Katharine, you got the highest score in school."

When I was a sophomore, I was floundering in Geometry. My mama had told me that she didn't like Algebra but she loved geometry so it must be easy. I didn't pay too much attention to what the teacher said because I was one of those smart ones that knew everything. But I couldn't make the problems come out right. I was just floundering. I was complaining to Auntie Frances about it and she said to ask Uncle Lewis about it. So I showed him my school work and he said, "Well, you haven't proven anything." Well, that didn't mean anything to me. After I memorized the theories then it all made sense. I just loved geometry and algebra that Mama thought was so hard.

One time Uncle Lewis got mad at me. I was very finicky about my hair; I had to have every curl in place and everybody had gone out to the sled. Uncle Lewis came in and was upset because I was making everyone late. Aunt Maude was uncomfortable because Uncle Lewis was so upset.

When I was fourteen, Papa got me a job working for a farmer's wife during the summer. I cooked, cleaned, took care of the baby, etc. and I made $4.00 a week.

After I graduated from Nursing School when I was 23, I rented a room in Spokane for $15.00 a month and was an on call private-duty nurse. One of the doctors asked me to take care of a man that was in Sprague for 3 weeks and I was to make $7.00 a day. He was ornery and all of his nurses and housekeepers had quit on him. The man really liked me and wanted me to marry him! He was 80 years old!

I had to return to Almota to care for my mother who was sick with Sprue. I was there for several months helping her recover. While I was there with her, I went to the First Mennonite Church, which is now the Onecho Bible Church,

The women's missionary society had a tea and they asked Mama to speak about missions in China. Phoebe Aeschliman arrived a little late and someone took her over to meet

Mama and said, "This is Mrs. Gilbert." Aunt Phoebe looked at her and repeated her name questioning like and said, "Oh, our mail man's wife. I thought she was somebody important." Mama took it all very well and laughed about it many times. After this introduction, Aunt Phoebe and Mama became very good friends.

Courtship:

I met John Aeschliman at church. He would take me to church functions. We had been going together for quite awhile and everyone kept asking us if I had a ring yet or if he had asked me yet. I kept asking, "Asked me what?" He finally did ask me when we were on our way back from some function. We were sitting there cuddling and he said, "When are we going to get married?" I said, "You haven't asked me yet!" I wasn't going to make it easy on him. So he finally said, "I love you; will you marry me?"

We couldn't get married right away because he wasn't set up and ready for marriage. We were engaged for about 1 ½ years. I was just bidding my time and working some in Spokane, but I was anxious to get married. John was working so much out in the field and we didn't see each other too much during this time. He would come up to Spokane to see me once in a while. He kept putting it off and putting it off and I said, "Well if you don't have time to get married, then maybe we should just call the whole thing off." He was afraid to get married and afraid of the change but he didn't like the idea of calling it off either, so we were finally married May 14, 1931. I wore a yellow chiffon dress and we had the wedding outside at my parent's house.

When John came to the house, I had all the flowers in the house and decorated the living room with them. John said, "I thought we were going to be married outside under the tree." I said, "Well, the weather doesn't look so good so I thought I'd set it up in the house." Well, he insisted on having it outside so he carried all the flowers outside. Violet Rubin made the cake. The newspaper write-up about the wedding states, that we "received many practical gifts."

Before we got married there was only an outhouse at the homestead. John said there was no way he was going to bring his bride home to an outhouse so they put in a bathroom and remodeled some of the house before we got married.

We were only on a honeymoon for about three days because we got married during plowing season. He said, "Well, I'm not through plowing yet." I said, "Well you're never going to be through farming. Every time I think there is a lull and we can take time to get married you have something else that comes up that has to be done." He was scared, and this was a big step for him; he had been a bachelor for so long; he was 32 when we got married.

The night that I got my ring from John, it was the night of the Christmas program at church. I was to sing in the program. When I got up there to sing, Lucille Buri, who was about four at the time, was asleep on her father's lap and she woke up and started crying.

She cried so loud, I couldn't hear myself and I got the giggles and I couldn't stop. So, Jeanette came up and took up singing and finished the song for me.

Married life:

I enjoyed farm life. It was hard but interesting. One time, Uncle Lewis came to visit and he looked around the place and John showed him the barn with all the horses and the 3 ½ sections of land. He thought that was ridiculous; no one needed that much land! Uncle Lewis only had 80 acres but he was a dairy farmer.

After we were married, that first summer, John told me that we were to have a garden and it was now to be my responsibility. I had never done any gardening; it was never perfect and John let me know that quite often!

I had to go take care of my mother and I had been gone away from home for about a week. John came in on Sunday to see them and when he saw me, he came up and shook my hand. I was so insulted that I burst into tears; he didn't want to kiss me in front of the family!

My mother lived in Tacoma, WA, when she died of Sprue in 1937 at the age of 68. I was 30 years old then. Sprue is a disease she contracted in China. She went on a trip to Kansas to visit her mother and family that summer and when she came back she had lost 40 pounds. When I saw her I just burst in to tears and said, "You've got to come to my doctor." But he hadn't ever heard of Sprue and couldn't find anything about it in his medical books.

After the funeral, I just felt awfully lonesome. At that time a photographer came by and offered to take a photo and make enlargements of them and frame them for $13. That was a lot of money, then, too. The only photo I had was a snap shot that Uncle Lewis had made. So I gave him the photo and John wasn't home and when he came home I told him that it cost $13. He didn't say anything or scold me but it made me feel better to have a picture of my mother. It took me quite a while to get over her death.

(Kristi recorded this and Elinor transcribed it verbatim—this is all the farther she got with her autobiography.)